THE WORK OF OUR HANDS
November 2, 2008
All Saints' Sunday

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Psalm 90:1–6, 13–17
Revelation 21:1–4
Deuteronomy 34:1–12

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!
Psalm 90:17 (NRSV)

Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a lifetime;
therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful
or good makes sense in any immediate context of history;
therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do,
however virtuous, can be accomplished alone.
Therefore, we are saved by love.

Reinhold Niebuhr

One of the aesthetic, architectural, and engineering wonders of the world is the dome of the cathedral, the duomo, in Florence, Italy. The height and span has never been surpassed. Sir Christopher Wren's cupola for St. Paul's in London is thirty feet smaller. The dome of the United States Capitol in Washington is two-thirds the size. Michelangelo traveled to Florence to study the dome so that he could build a larger one for St. Peter's in Rome. He did not succeed. The cupola of St. Peter's is ten feet narrower.

The man who designed the dome—and the mechanical lifts and braces, the scaffolding and platforms to build on, and then every day supervised the construction—was Filippo Brunelleschi. Work on the cathedral in the center of Florence had been going on for more than a century. In 1418, Brunelleschi, then forty-one, won a competition to design the dome and then spent the rest of his life building it, figuring out how to support it, how to design hoists to lift millions of pounds of stone forty stories into the air. In 1446 it was almost complete; the first stone of the dome's lantern was consecrated by the Archbishop of Florence. Brunelleschi died a month later and never saw the completed work, free of scaffolding, ropes, pulleys—the stunning dome, one of the most beautiful sights in the world. Brunelleschi

got close, but not all the way there. Someone else would have to complete his work (see *Brunelleschi's Dome*, Ross King).

Not unlike old Moses standing on the top of Mount Nebo, looking into the distance and seeing the Jordan River and, beyond in the distance, the land, the promised land toward which Moses had been leading the tribes of Israel for forty years. The purpose of this trip up the mountain was for God to show Moses the land and to announce that Moses himself is not going to get there. Someone else, Joshua, will complete his work and lead the people into the land.

What a life it had been. Moses narrowly escaped with his life as an infant, was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter but was actually raised by his own mother in the Egyptian royal household, rose through the ranks of government, while becoming increasingly aware of his Hebrew identity. Moses murdered an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew slave, escaped into the wilderness where God, in a burning bush, tracked him down and sent Moses back to Egypt to lead his people to freedom. It's a great story about plagues and high-level negotiations, a late-night escape, a near disaster at the Red Sea, and then forty years of walking through the wilderness of Sinai: Moses leading, interceding with God, teaching, scolding, prodding, inspiring, threatening. It was his life's work, and now it is over. They have arrived at Mount Nebo, a striking outcrop to the east of the Dead Sea, near Jericho. From the top you can see in all four directions, a breathtaking view of the land ahead, the wilderness behind—past and future.

My theology professor and mentor, the late Joseph Sittler, preached and published a sermon-essay—theology professors' sermons have a way of sounding like academic essays—with the arresting title "The View from Mount Nebo," a title so good it has been shamelessly lifted by hundreds of preachers along the way. I resisted, but I do remember the thesis—namely that we frequently find ourselves in a position similar to Moses': seeing a reality from afar, knowing it is out there, but understanding that we personally may not get there, a dynamic Cubs fans know intimately (we were on Mt. Nebo this year; we could actually see the promised land). Faith, Sittler said, is a lot like that for a lot of people. We know the reality of faith from afar even though we may not experience it fully, personally. But it is enough. The view from Mount Nebo is enough. I recall visiting Mount Nebo on a Fourth Church trip, seeing, from its heights, exactly what Moses saw and what inspired my old professor—and being deeply moved.

Moses was not going to experience the final completion of his life's work. Joshua, a young leader full of wisdom and courage, would lead the people into the land and over the years secure it. Moses would descend from Mount Nebo and die—old, but his sight unimpaired and his vigor unabated.

Never was there another like him, the Bible says. “Prosper the work of our hands,” one of the great psalms, Psalm 90, puts it. God is eternal; God’s steadfast love will never come to an end.

> Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.
> Before the mountains were brought forth, . . .
> from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

The psalm articulates the brevity and fragility of human life—like a dream, like grass. “Teach us to number our days,” the psalmist advises, and then concludes poignantly:

> Prosper for us, the work of our hands—
> O prosper the work of our hands.

Brunelleschi looking up at his almost completed work. Moses peering into the promised land, his work over, but not quite complete.

> O prosper the work of our hands.
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> O help me to know that my part of the work you have for me is done. O help me to open my hands and let it go. O give me the faith and trust that others will pick it up and bring it to conclusion.

Martin Marty said there comes a day for all of us when we realize we are not going to accomplish everything we set out to do. He was referring to reading and the realization that he is not going to live long enough to read all the books he wants and intends to read. His recommendation is to learn to be satisfied reading what other people have to say about them in the reviews.

I have always loved something the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said:

> Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we are saved by love.

Nothing important— our best work—is ever finished: our parenting, our service to institutions and causes we care about, our research, our teaching, our practice of a profession, our building a home, our building life-giving relationships — never accomplished alone, never done.

Who will complete our work? Part of the answer is in the idea we celebrate this morning on All Saints' Sunday, the communion of saints. It takes most of a lifetime to make sense of it. I can recall reading the archaic language about it in the older communion liturgy, when I was in my twenties, newly ordained:

> It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty that we should at all times and all places give thanks unto thee, O Holy Lord. . . . Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we worship and adore thy Holy Name.

What's that about: angels and archangels and all the company of heaven? If truth were told, I found those words so peculiar that I often simply bypassed them. And then a parent dies and you begin to understand. The more people I have known and loved and lost, the more meaningful those words have become.

We are not alone. We have been preceded by generations of saints who have lived and worked and loved and died in faith—"the saints who from their labors rest." And the other side of it: we will be followed by others who will take up where we left off, people who will prosper the work of our hands and complete the work in which we are engaged.

One of the best ideas about the communion of saints and All Saints' Sunday I ever heard is that our lives are like a big, gracious house, with lawn, pillars, lots of rooms. We have a dining room where we eat, a bedroom where we sleep, a parlor where we relax, a basement where we take the trash and garbage. Carlyle Marney, the Southern Baptist theologian who originated this metaphor, used to say that the human problem is that we spend too much time down in that basement with the trash. On the outside of the house that is our life, Marney said, is a balcony, and on that balcony are our saints, the ones who taught us and nurtured us and disciplined us and inspired us. They are part of who we are, the ones who taught us how to believe and how to love. Our parents and grandparents are up there, and so are people whose work we admired and aspired to complete—people in the generations before us and people all the way back in history. On All Saints' Sunday, Marney said, you ought to go outside and look up at your balcony and wave at the people up there. They are your saints. And there is space up on that balcony for those who will come after us, generations yet to come, people who will live and love and work and prosper the work of our hands.

The bedrock conviction of our faith is that God's steadfast love is not confined to our lifetime but is eternal, that God's love for the world and for you and me is a reality before we are here and after we are gone. It's what

old John, a Christian leader in exile on the island of Patmos, facing his own death, meant when he wrote the beautiful words,

> The home of God is among mortals.
> He will dwell with them and be their God;
> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
> Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Our friend Dana Ferguson taught us a lesson these past several years and months and weeks as she lived with a heightened sense of life's fragility and her own mortality. She worked hard every day, doing the work to which she believed she was called. She knew better than most of us that a day would come when her part of God's work would end and others, you and I, for instance, would take it up and complete it.

Earlier this year she preached a sermon, "Giving Up," in which she had to be thinking of her own life and experience when she said,

> I have often heard people say of someone who has long battled a debilitating disease, "She's giving up." I'm sure there are times when that is true. However, I want to offer that I think more often than not something else is going on—that instead of giving up, people make very important choices when their lives seem to be coming to an end. It's a very different thing than giving up. I might call it trading up. Their dream or hope of returning to a life of health, or at least comfort and doing all or some of the things they once loved, simply isn't going to happen. So they let go of that dream and take hold of another precious promise. They dream no longer of full health but of dignity and as much comfort during their last days until they come to the real promise. But first, they must let the dream of a former life die. They must let that hope die so that birth might happen.
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> And so they do, and in time, the old life dies and they enter into a new life, a new life where there is pain and torment no more, where there is no weeping and no tears. They have died to life—to be born to eternal life.

You and I live and move and have our being in a long line of saints who have preceded us. In our time we have picked up and done work they began before us. Some of them are on our balconies. Their love and devotion, their commitment and courage and faith, still influence us and inspire us, and we continue their work. Dana Ferguson is on the balcony for many of us. She is on the balcony—one of the saints of Fourth Presbyterian Church. And in time, there will come men and women who will continue the work we have begun. That is the promise.

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands.

Amen.